

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw

## Book Information

George Bernard Shaw, Pygmalion  
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Penguin Putnam, 1913  
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Book Level: 7.0  
Interest Level: UG

A Cockney flower girl's metamorphosis into a lady has a lot to say about class, money, freedom, and women's independence.

**Topics:** Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Freedoms; Community Life, Social Iniquities; Fantasy/Imagination, Misc./Other; Humor/Funny, Funny; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Religion, Misc./Other

## Main Characters

Alfred Doolittle Eliza's father, who is made unhappy because he inherits a large sum of money and must join the middle class

Clara Eynsford Hill daughter of Mrs. Eynsford Hill

Colonel Pickering a friend who helps Higgins with Eliza's transformation

Eliza Doolittle the vulgar flower girl who eventually convinces others she is a duchess

Freddy Eynsford Hill son of Mrs. Eynsford Hill, who falls in love with Eliza

Henry Higgins the professor, who is an expert in phonetics and helps transform Eliza

Mrs. Eynsford Hill a somewhat impoverished upper-middle class woman

Mrs. Higgins Henry Higgins's mother

Mrs. Pearce Higgins's housekeeper

Nepommuck Higgins's first pupil, who attends the garden party

## Vocabulary

**bilious** of a peevish disposition

**blackguard** scoundrel

**diffident** reserved, unassertive

**sanguinary** bloodthirsty

## Synopsis

As the play begins, people have taken shelter from a rainstorm under the portico of St. Paul's church in London. Among them is Eliza Doolittle, a lowly flower girl. A man taking notes of Eliza's words turns out to be Henry Higgins, an expert in phonetics.

Eliza arrives at Higgins's home the next day, wanting to hire him to give her the speech lessons she needs for a job in a flower shop. Colonel Pickering, who was among the crowd the night before and is staying with Higgins, makes a wager with Higgins. To win, Higgins must pass Eliza off as a duchess at an ambassador's garden party. Eliza's father attempts to blackmail Higgins, but ends up leaving after securing five pounds with which to get drunk.

Higgins takes Eliza to his mother's house some time later. Clara, Freddy, and Mrs. Eynsford Hill, who were under the portico when Higgins met Eliza, are there, and they do not recognize her. Although Eliza's speech is technically perfect, she relates vulgar details in a story about her aunt's death.

Time passes. Eliza successfully pretends to be a duchess at the party. At home, the men congratulate each other. Eliza's feelings and concerns for her future are ignored. She throws Higgins's slippers at him, and later leaves the house. Freddy, in love with Eliza, has been watching the house. They go off together.

Eliza spends the night at Mrs. Higgins's. The next morning, Higgins and Pickering arrive, concerned about Eliza's disappearance. They learn Eliza is there. Alfred Doolittle arrives. He is upset because he has inherited unwanted money due to comments by Higgins that Doolittle was England's most original moralist. Doolittle is reluctantly on his way to wed his common-law wife, which he feels forced to do in recognition of his new place in society. Before Eliza leaves for her father's wedding, Higgins tries to convince her to return to his house, saying he treats her as well as he treats anyone else, and that the three of them will live as "three bachelors." Eliza

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says she will not return, and claims she plans to marry Freddy.

The sequel to the play states that Eliza did marry Freddy, and they set up a flower shop with financial help from Pickering.

### Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

#### Initial Understanding

Why did Eliza tell Colonel Pickering to call her Eliza and Higgins to call her Miss Doolittle?

*Pickering treated her respectfully from the beginning, helping her to earn her own self-respect. Therefore, he had earned her friendship. Higgins, on the other hand, always treated her like a flower girl, even as he was teaching her fine speech.*

#### Literary Analysis

Describe how Eliza is transformed during the course of the play.

*We see her first as low and vulgar. During the play, she shows her native intelligence and desire to improve herself. She succeeds, but in the process becomes slave-like to Higgins. At the end of the play, she comes into her own and asserts her independence.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Why did Eliza tell Higgins after the garden party that she wished he had left her where he found her?

*She had become too refined to return to selling flowers on the street, but was not trained to make a living any other way. He suggested she marry, but she claimed that entailed selling herself.*

#### Constructing Meaning

What was Shaw saying about morality through the character of Alfred Doolittle?

*He was attacking middle-class morality. When he became wealthy, Doolittle was forced to join the middle class, which he was loathe to do. He said being in the middle class would force him to live for others instead of himself. Relatives and employees would all depend on him for money. He would have to live by middle class conventions. He would no longer be free.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Henry Higgins is a colorful character brimming with both negative and positive qualities. Ask the students to work in small groups and list all the favorable and unfavorable attributes they can about him. Discuss and merge the lists. Then, discuss how the students think they would feel if Henry Higgins were in their lives as a teacher, neighbor, coach, or parent.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) had a distinguished and prolific career as a playwright, critic, and political activist. Ask the students to research Shaw's life and to write a short essay about it. Suggest they include comments about how his life and views are reflected in *Pygmalion*.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** George Bernard Shaw believed that art should be instructive. Ask the students to identify the lessons Shaw was trying to teach through the play *Pygmalion*. Discuss these lessons as a class. Was Shaw's attempt to teach successful?

**Comparing and Contrasting** *Pygmalion* is based on the Greek legend of Pygmalion and Galatea. In the legend, a sculptor, Pygmalion, falls in love with the beautiful statue he has carved. He prays for the statue to be brought to life, and his wish is fulfilled. He marries the woman who was formerly a statue, Galatea. Ask the students to read the original legend and write an essay comparing and contrasting the legend with Shaw's play.